

## Fiddle tunes in eighteenth-century Wales

*Cass Meurig*

---

Excerpted from:

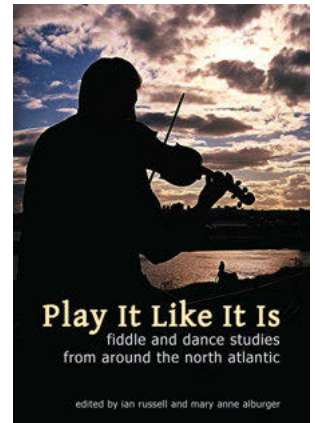
### Play It Like It Is

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic

*Edited by Ian Russell and Mary Anne Alburger*

First published in 2006 by The Elphinstone  
Institute, University of Aberdeen, MacRobert  
Building, King's College, Aberdeen, AB24 5UA

ISBN 0-9545682-3-0



---

About the author:

**Cass Meurig** works as a *crwth* and traditional fiddle player, specialising in the Welsh tradition. She holds a PhD from Bangor University on the music of the fiddler in eighteenth-century Wales and is the author of *Alawon John Thomas*, an edition of a 1752 manuscript of fiddle tunes. She is also one of the few players of the Welsh *crwth*, a medieval bowed lyre, and in 2004 released an album of music for the instrument, entitled *Crwth*.

---

Copyright © 2006 the Elphinstone Institute and the contributors

While copyright in the volume as a whole is vested in the Elphinstone Institute, copyright in individual contributions remains with the contributors. The moral rights of the contributors to be identified as the authors of their work have been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.



## Fiddle tunes in eighteenth-century Wales

CASS MEURIG

Wales is not a country immediately associated with fiddle playing. Famous for harp playing and choral singing, it is often forgotten that at one time the Welsh also had a thriving fiddle tradition. The violin probably arrived in Wales around the beginning of the seventeenth century, where it co-existed for a time with earlier stringed instruments such as the *crwth* or *crowd* (a six-stringed bowed lyre), the viol, and earlier types of fiddles. The height of its popularity was the eighteenth century, when the fiddle could be heard at fairs, itinerant dramas, weddings, funerals, and domestic merry-making, as well as in the houses of the gentry.<sup>1</sup> Towards the end of the century, religious revivals brought a sharp decline in the number of fiddle players in Wales. During the years which followed fewer and fewer people took up the instrument, until by the first half of the twentieth century the tradition of playing predominantly orally-transmitted folk tunes on the fiddle was mainly in the hands of a few Gypsy families.<sup>2</sup>

Within the last twenty years there has been a renewal of interest in Welsh fiddle playing, and there are now a considerable number of fiddlers playing Welsh tunes both in amateur sessions and professional bands. The current repertoire includes a good deal of orally-transmitted material, mainly from harp-playing and Welsh-language singing traditions. In addition, in their search for their own musical heritage, fiddlers have turned to the printed and manuscript collections of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Wales, with the aim of reviving a native Welsh repertoire as played during the heyday of Welsh fiddling. The following survey of the contents of the major sources of information regarding the repertoire of the eighteenth-century fiddlers may suggest to what extent such a repertoire ever really existed.

By the early eighteenth century, Welsh music had undergone a major period of modernisation. Well into the sixteenth century, musicians were still playing instruments and music which belonged in essence to the Middle Ages, under a system which recognized different classes of musicians from common minstrels to graduate musicians of considerable status. Graduates were required to master a highly conservative repertoire for harp and *crwth* known as *cerdd dant* ('string

music'); some of this music has survived in harp tablature in the manuscript of Robert ap Huw of Anglesey, copied c. 1613, whilst the titles of other pieces are known to us from contemporary grammars.<sup>3</sup> This music was archaic when the violin first reached Wales; by the eighteenth century it had virtually disappeared, along with the instruments which played it. The violin brought with it new, fashionable tunes from across the border which had very little to do with the old Welsh repertoire.

### **The Richard Morris MS**

The first major source of information on the repertoire of the Welsh fiddlers consists of four lists of Welsh and English tune titles made by Richard Morris of Anglesey around the year 1717, when he was fourteen or fifteen years old.<sup>4</sup> Richard could play the fiddle or viol, or possibly both; he entitled the second of his lists 'The names of the tunes that I can sing on the viol', and noted elsewhere in his manuscript the year in which he started to play the fiddle (it is worth noting that the terms 'fiddle', 'viol' and 'crwth' were used interchangeably in Wales during this period).<sup>5</sup> He recorded the names of 379 different tunes but unfortunately included no musical notation, probably because he knew the melodies by ear. To judge by their titles, less than a quarter of the Richard Morris MS tunes are likely to be Welsh in origin, and only a very few have any obvious connection with the earlier native string repertoire; for example, two titles which include the word '*dugan*' (probably a corruption of '*erddigan*', a form of music represented in Robert ap Huw's manuscript).<sup>6</sup> Over three quarters are probably English in origin, along with a few Scottish and Irish items. Many are found in the numerous books of country dances published in London at the time; others are ballad tunes and popular songs of the English theatre, such as 'Lilliburlero' and the Scots song 'Jenny Making Hay'. Clearly, early eighteenth-century Anglesey was not isolated from contemporary British musical fashions.

### **The John Thomas MS<sup>7</sup>**

The second source of Welsh fiddle repertoire is the manuscript of John Thomas, 1752.<sup>8</sup> John Thomas came from North-East Wales, to judge by the dialect of his Welsh, and appears to have been a working fiddler rather than an amateur collector of tunes. He wrote down 526 tunes, most of which are in modern notation. A small proportion are in an idiosyncratic form of violin notation probably invented by himself, consisting of a kind of musical shorthand in which notes appear as note-heads with ascending and descending passages written vertically, joined by lines to indicate the direction of the melody. Key, tonality and pulse are not shown and only the bare bones of the melody are recorded; it seems to have worked as an *aide-mémoire* to remind him of tunes he already knew by heart. In addition, he made several lists of tune titles which include a further forty tunes which he did not trouble to notate; these may have been the tunes with which he was most familiar.

His manuscript tells a similar story to Richard Morris's. The overall proportion of Welsh tunes in the manuscript is around 25%, although the figure is slightly higher amongst the listed tunes. Only a handful can claim any connection with the



Figure 1 A page from the John Thomas MS, fol. 68r.

old *cerdd dant* repertoire; among these is 'Drugan Troed Tant', or 'Erdigan Tro'r Tant' as it is found in other contemporary collections ('The *erddigan* of the turn of the string'), whose title harks back to the old 'tro tant' harp tuning. The majority of the melodies are country dance tunes and minuets from across the border, a considerable number

copied from books such as John Walsh's *Caledonian Country Dances* Vol. II (1737), although most seem, by the irregular nature of their notation, to have been written down from oral tradition. There are also a number of tunes in this idiom which appear to be Welsh compositions, such as the pretty minuet '*Morfa Rhuddlan*' (see Figure 1). Evidently, Welsh musicians had by then turned their hands to writing tunes according to the new fashion. Unlike Richard Morris, John Thomas included a limited number of pieces by popular composers of the day such as Handel, which he seems to have copied from printed sources.

John Thomas's manuscript also contains a large number of song tunes, most of which are of English or Scottish extraction, but some of which are Welsh. These include both ballad tunes and melodies used for the singing of Welsh-language 'floating stanzas' in the tradition known as *canu penillion*.<sup>9</sup> It seems that one of the fiddler's functions was to accompany singers, continuing a tradition of bowed accompaniment to singing which stretches back to the days of the *crwth*. The ballad tunes are perhaps the most interesting part of John Thomas's repertoire, three examples of which can be seen in Figure 1 ('*Gwêl Adeilad*', '*Mentra Gwen*' and '*Brynie'r Werddon*'). The majority seem by their notation to have been recorded from oral tradition, although he was probably not a singer himself, since he records no verses. However, numerous contemporary ballads have survived which are indicated in their titles to have been sung to tunes recorded by John Thomas. By setting verses from these ballads to the melodies as they are found in the manuscript, it becomes evident that the tunes have been adapted perfectly to the rhythms of the Welsh language, and, in the case of some of the English and Scottish tunes, have changed considerably from their originals; this is the case for '*Gwêl Adeilad*', which began its career as an early seventeenth-century ballad tune entitled 'See the Building' (the Welsh title is a direct translation).<sup>10</sup> John Thomas's repertoire can be seen as a regional variant of a pan-British popular tradition, with Welsh tunes forming a core element of the tunes he knew best.

### **Welsh music in London**

Meanwhile, to digress from fiddle collections for a moment, by the mid-eighteenth century Welsh tunes had begun to be published in London. Capitalising on new markets for printed music (and part of a network of expatriate Welshmen), the harpists John Parry and Edward Jones between them published seven books of tunes between 1742 and 1820.<sup>11</sup> Their volumes contain a much higher content of Welsh tunes than either Richard Morris's lists or John Thomas's manuscript, and far fewer English and Scottish country dance tunes. Although this might suggest that the Welsh harpists' repertoire was more Welsh than that of the fiddlers, since the books published in London had an antiquarian and a commercial agenda in mind, they may not necessarily represent the true state of popular music in Wales at the time in the same way as the grass-roots evidence of Richard Morris and John Thomas.

Both John Parry and Edward Jones are clearly aiming to authenticate the antiquity of the Welsh musical tradition. Many tunes are printed with footnotes supplying pseudo-historical pedigrees (often extending back to the Dark Ages), and in the later publications, English and Scottish tunes are given Welsh-language titles. The ballad tune 'Consumption', for example, was called '*Gorweddwch Eich Hun*' ('Lie Yourself Down'), whilst 'The King's Own Farewell' was translated to '*Ymadawiad y Brenin*' and 'Crimson Velvet' became '*Cwyn Brython*' ('The Briton's Lament'). However, John Parry and Edward Jones did secure the preservation and promotion of that element of the Welsh repertoire which was 'made in Wales' (and which included some genuinely old material), and succeeded in forging a new Welsh identity for part of the remainder of the eclectic rag-bag of tunes popular at the time.

### **Influence of published music**

The printed collections of Welsh music were highly influential, not only on the London-Welsh intelligentsia, but also on musicians at home. One such musician was the fiddler Morris Edward, whose manuscript is dated 1778/9.<sup>12</sup> All that is known of Morris Edward is that he was paid two guineas for playing the fiddle at Bodorgan Manor in Anglesey for a fortnight, and that he may have subscribed to John Parry's third book, *British Harmony* (1781). Edward certainly had access to *British Harmony* as well as to John Parry's first book, *Antient British Music* (1742), and Edward Jones's *Musical and Poetical Relicks of the Welsh Bards* (1784), since he copied tunes from all three volumes.

Around three-quarters of Morris Edward's 158 tunes are probably of Welsh origin, a far higher proportion than the earlier fiddle collections. Most are tunes in 3/4 or common time, rather than the lively 6/8 country dance tunes which make up the majority of John Thomas's repertoire. Some bear the names of earlier dance forms such as the galliard and almain; others, such as '*Cynsêt Griffith Rowlant y Crythor*' ('Griffith Rowland the Crowther's Conceit'), claim connections with older strands of Welsh music and may originally have been played on the crwth (see Figure 2). His choice of repertoire may have been due to the personal tastes of the families for whom he played, such as the Meyrick family of Bodorgan. They seem to have had a particular interest in Welsh music, but were probably not typical of the Welsh gentry, most of whom were rapidly losing interest in their national heritage. A more likely explanation is that Morris Edward, like John Parry and Edward Jones, was considerably more interested in Welsh tunes in particular than popular music in general, and that his manuscript was more of an antiquary's collection than a working book.

Despite Morris Edward's evidence, it seems most unlikely that popular musical taste in Anglesey had veered away from English and Scottish country dance tunes towards older Welsh melodies, given the increased traffic between Wales and England. Other Welsh manuscripts provide evidence of the continuing popularity of English tunes in Wales towards the end of the century. A tune book signed 'Richard Hocknill, Late fighting cocks Oswestry, Salop July 31 1780', for instance,

consists mainly of English dance tunes, while a collection signed 'John Evans Errwddu Darowen Montgomery 1796' contains sacred music and English dance tunes.<sup>13</sup> Around the beginning of the nineteenth century, the harpist Evan Jones of Gorlan, Llanrwst ('Ifan y Gorlan') compiled a manuscript containing numerous new dances from over the border, such as waltzes and quadrilles, as well as Welsh tunes; in addition, several early nineteenth-century manuscript collections which passed into the possession of the Richards family of Darowen contain a mixture of English and Welsh tunes.<sup>14</sup> Evidently, English tunes did not cease to be played in Wales. Morris Edward's manuscript seems rather to show the influence of the antiquarian movement on educated musicians in Wales, and in particular the impact of the books of John Parry and Edward Jones.



**Figure 2** A page from Morris Edward's manuscript, University of Wales, Bangor MS 2294, p. 27

To conclude this brief survey, it is clear that a large percentage of the popular fiddle repertoire of eighteenth-century Wales consisted of country dances and

ballad tunes from over the border. By the latter half of the century some of these had 'gone native' to the extent that they were published as Welsh tunes in John Parry's and Edward Jones's collections, complete with Welsh titles and bogus pedigrees. At the same time, there was a movement to save the last remnants of the older native repertoire. Nineteenth-century Welsh collectors were to continue the trend, publishing older tunes alongside the new and giving Welsh names to popular English and Scottish tunes. The Welsh cultural revival had succeeded in claiming a part of the mongrel instrumental repertoire of Wales, bestowing upon it a new genealogy.

What of the modern musician keen to revive the repertoire of the old Welsh fiddlers? The majority of players, unaware of the complex history of the music in the Welsh collections (or turning a blind eye to it), are happy to accept the tunes at face value. The tune 'Butter and Peas', for example, which was popular all over Britain and is found in English and Scottish sources well before it is attested in Wales, is commonly accepted as Welsh on the grounds that at some point in its career in the oral tradition it acquired the transliterated title '*Pwt ar y Bys*'. Country dance 'standards' such as this form a substantial part of the current Welsh fiddle repertoire, and perhaps rightly so, since they are part of the Welsh musical heritage even if many were not composed in Wales. But there is, of course, nothing distinctively Welsh in style about such tunes. As a result, some players have begun to seek out older tunes with stranger melodies and more unfamiliar rhythms that they feel may hold a stronger national identity. The desire to establish a Welsh repertoire continues, in much the same spirit as it did in the eighteenth century. The fiddle collections remind us that a good deal of that repertoire has crossed some boundaries along its way.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> On the function and livelihood of the eighteenth-century fiddlers, see Cass Meurig, 'The Fiddler in Eighteenth-Century Wales' *Welsh Music History*, 5, ed. Sally Harper and Wyn Thomas (Bangor, 2002), pp. 22-40.
- <sup>2</sup> For an early twentieth-century account of some nineteenth-century Welsh fiddlers, see W. Meredith Morris, *Famous Fiddlers*, ed D. Roy Saer (Cardiff: Welsh Folk Museum, National Museum of Wales, 1983). On Gypsy fiddlers, see Eldra and A. O. H. Jarman, *The Welsh Gypsies: Children of Abram Wood* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1981).
- <sup>3</sup> Robert ap Huw's manuscript is reproduced in Henry Lewis, ed., *Musica*, British Museum Additional Manuscript 14905, facsimile edn (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1936).
- <sup>4</sup> T. H. Parry-Williams, *Llawysgrif Richard Morris o Gerddi* (Caerdydd [Cardiff]: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1931), pp. 66-67, 80-81, 85-86; 104-107.
- <sup>5</sup> Parry-Williams (1931), pp. 30, 214.
- <sup>6</sup> Other tunes with older connotations are '*Hun Gwenllian*', which may be identified with '*Y Ddigan Hun Wenllian*' listed by Robert ap Huw (H. Lewis, 1936), p. 109 and '*Sidanen*' which occurs in a list of tunes probably connected with music for the Christmas festivities at Lleweni manor, Denbighshire c. 1595 (Bangor MS Gwyneddon 4, p. 130) and in a list of 40 '*Lute Leasons*' written by Philip Powell of Brecon in 1633 (Cardiff MS 3.42, p. 157).



- <sup>7</sup> Cass Meurig, ed., *Alawon John Thomas: A Fiddler's Tune Book from Eighteenth-Century Wales* (Aberystwyth: National Library of Wales, 2004).
- <sup>8</sup> J. Lloyd Williams MS 39, National Library of Wales, published with notes on the tunes and their historical and musical context as Cass Meurig (ed.), *Alawon John Thomas: A Fiddler's Tune Book from Eighteenth-Century Wales* (National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth 2004). A full analysis of John Thomas's manuscript can be found in Cass Meurig, 'The Music of the Fiddler in Eighteenth-Century Wales: A Study of the Manuscript of John Thomas' (PhD thesis, University of Bangor, 2001).
- <sup>9</sup> Literally 'the singing of stanzas', *canu penillion* refers to the Welsh tradition in which individual 'floating' stanzas could be sung in a number of possible ways to a variety of different melodies played by an instrumentalist. In 'Northern-style' *penillion* singing the singer entered several bars into the tune and improvised a simple counter-melody, continuing to the end of the tune without pause, whereas in the 'Southern style' he entered at the beginning of the tune and might add an interlaced or following refrain. Both styles are represented in the John Thomas manuscript.
- <sup>10</sup> The earliest extant version of the tune occurs in a virginal set of c. 1600-1625; for a comparison of the two versions see Meurig, 'The Music of the Fiddler in Eighteenth-Century Wales', p. 174.
- <sup>11</sup> John Parry, *Antient British Music* (London, 1742); John Parry, *British Harmony, being a Collection of Antient Welsh Airs* (Ruabon/London, 1781); John Parry, *A Collection of Welsh, English and Scotch Airs* (London, 1761); Edward Jones, *Musical and Poetical Relicks of the Welsh Bards* (London 1784; 2nd ed., London, 1794); Edward Jones, *The Bardic Museum of Primitive British Literature* (London, 1802); Edward Jones, *Hen Ganiadau Cymru* (London, 1820).
- <sup>12</sup> MS 2294, University of Wales, Bangor.
- <sup>13</sup> Cwrt Mawr (Music) MSS 6 and 9, National Library of Wales.
- <sup>14</sup> 'Ifan y Gorlan' MS: J. Lloyd Williams MS 49; Richards family MSS: Cwrt Mawr (Music) MSS 15, 21 and 50; National Library of Wales. An interesting manuscript dated 1793 with a slightly higher Welsh content is Cwrt Mawr (Music) MS 12, National Library of Wales, which consists mainly of ballad tunes.